Dialogue

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Modeling Community: A Response to "The Oceanic Imaginary"

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Subramani's essay makes a noteworthy contribution to literary and cultural studies in Oceania in several important areas. In keeping with its genesis as a keynote address it duly offers an overview, problematizes the subject in a global context, and proposes a research agenda to address present and future challenges. I admire Subramani's commitment and pluck in undertaking such a daunting, but necessary task at this millennial crossroads in Oceania's social history. With the firm establishment of Oceanic writing, film, and performance on the world stage, the time has come for regional writers to articulate conceptual frameworks that offer access to more complex levels of meaning and understanding. This imperative has surfaced at conferences and meetings of regional writers with increasing urgency over the last decade. It's an idea whose time has come. Perhaps Subramani's greatest contribution here is to have made a start at all, to have offered this formal beginning. What I miss in the essay, however, is more recognition of the considerable amount of work, both past and present, already (being) accomplished by regional writers and others at the service of excavating Oceanic archives of knowledge. However, despite my reservations about the clarity and inclusiveness of Subramani's vision as put forth in this keynote-cum-essay, I am grateful to him for taking up the challenge and to *The Contemporary Pacific* for clearing a space for this discussion.

One important strength I find in "The Oceanic Imaginary" is its intentionality, its insistent sense of purpose. It calls us Oceanians to order and raises questions. Whither Oceanic "literature" in the new millennium? On what basis? Toward what end(s)? Engaging what audience(s)? As defined by whom? I also find great merit in Subramani's proposed application of Foucault's "order of things" by excavating a body of Oceanic knowledge toward the end of articulating a regional epistemology. Such an epistemological archive, "encompassing the kaleidoscope of Oceanic cultures and tracing diverse and complex forms of knowledge—philosophies, car-

tographies, languages, genealogies, and repressed knowledges" would surely increase possibilities for more widespread understanding and appreciation of Oceanic arts and cultures.

What I find less winning, however, is Subramani's discussion of linkages between his selected "variables" and the overarching project of epistemological research in Oceania. Where I would part company with his analysis is in privileging the importance of geopolitical issues of nation-state and globalism over cultural and political questions of Pacific displacements. I certainly have no argument with the fact or choice of these particular variables as shaping influences on the "production of the new epistemologies." It's important and helpful to be reminded of the responsibility and power available to writers and intellectuals in their mediating role vis-à-vis nation-states and global forces. The ruptures of national and multinational structures of power are all too evident. They loom, threaten, and daunt; they often seem intractable. As individuals we Islanders may and often do harbor a sense of futility about our chances of effecting any constructive change in such macro-arenas of human life. By contrast, I would suggest that the arena of displacement is another story altogether. Issues of displacement are up close and personal. They tend to be in our faces in more urgent and immediate ways. As ordinary citizens on any given day, we have more direct agency, more immediate possibilities to negotiate the dynamics of displacement than we do those of nation-states and global forces.

It is in Subramani's discussion of displacement, his second informing variable, that I find a blurring of the essay's corrective vision. He begins promisingly enough by establishing the value and desirability of "seeking connections" across the range of diasporic locations in and out of Oceania. He points to significant writing that highlights the dynamics of diaspora: Hau'ofa and Wendt, in addition to the "postmodern . . . younger generation"—Pule, Figiel, Teaiwa, Mishra. Then his discursive path forks into two distinct directions, and he seems to go in both at once. He makes a sweeping dismissal of postmodernism as offering "little utility in postcolonial societies" in its inability to address the *"real problem,"* that is, "the threat by transnational capital and its capacity to destroy *all previously accepted values*" (emphasis added). Aside from the inadvisability of tossing the proverbial baby out with the postmodern bathwater, I find the repeated occurrence of such essentializing or generalizing language problematic, both here and elsewhere in the essay.

If we choose to locate the "real" problem of our condition as extrane-

ous, for example, the threat of transnational capital, where then can we locate other contributing and compelling factors such as agency? On what basis would transnationalism be more "real" or devastating a problem than say, internalized colonialism? To my mind, the insidious nature of internalized colonialism presents a more clear and present danger to our cultural survival in any number of ways, chief of which are the countless ways it operates to sever connections rather than to seek them. The psychosocial aspects of internalized oppression as explored by Fanon, Mannoni, and others are clearly at play in much of Oceania and the diaspora. The alarming incidence of substance abuse, domestic violence, suicide, and the steep rise in stress-related diseases blighting our communities is symptomatic. By definition, these pathologies are about severing social connections at the root. The enemy "other" gets misconstrued as ourselves or other Oceanians, those from another part of the region or the city. Those with different skin color or hair texture or body size. Those with different "educational" levels, cultural credentials, political views, income levels. Those we perceive as more disempowered than ourselves. Through any of the myriad forms that internalized oppression can take, we have the potential to effectively inflict genocide on ourselves.

My point here is not to privilege one type of "problem" over another. Obviously, the challenges we face arise from very complex, interlocking dynamics that point to any number of possible responses and strategies. I do wish to speak up for the importance of both language and inclusion in the way that we map key terms and categories, for example that of displacement. I do wish to speak up for more of the work already accomplished or already in progress toward the laudable goal of articulating an Oceanic epistemology. Subramani proposes that "literature" could *begin* to play its critical role of "reimagining" Oceania and thereby produce outlines of the "new epistemologies." The implied effacement of omitted work is echoed in the repetition of Frederic Jameson's ominous subjunctive as both epigraph and coda: "If we can imagine nothing else . . ." Given the limited field of "exemplary" writers foregrounded in the essay, one could readily (and mistakenly) infer that the critical work of writing the "new" Oceania had yet to begin in any noteworthy way.

It's what's omitted from the essay's discussion of displacements that I find telling and unsettling. Who and what are missing from the family picture? What of cultural politics? Of internalized colonialism? Of locality vis-à-vis indigeneity? Of reinscribing gender identities? Of theater? Film? Influential musical forms like hip-hop and Jawaiian? What of Hawaiians

and Aboriginal writers? By what criteria is Wendt's novel *Sons for the Return Home* (1973) credited as "Oceania's very first novel," when Papua New Guinea's Vincent Eri published his novel *The Crocodile* several years earlier, in 1970? What of pathbreaking work from the 1940s that dealt explicitly with complex questions of displacement and cultural ambivalence, for example that of Johnnie Frisbie's *Miss Ulysses from Puka Puka,* first published in 1948? Or John Kneubuhl's groundbreaking work in postwar Honolulu in plays like *The Harp in the Willows* and *This City Is Haunted,* which effectively staked out the claim for an indigenous Pacific theater by incorporating local themes and languages? My expectation is not that one essay should do and say everything. However, if connections are to be sought and cultivated across metaphysical expanses of displacement, surely we will need to cast our nets as widely as possible, especially in foundational matters like the clear definition of terms and issues of inclusion.

In response to the plaint, "What if we can imagine nothing else?" I would point out that Oceanic writers are well on their way to imagining something else, and have been doing so for some time. In the crucial area of reinscribing gender roles for example, groundbreaking work, both critical and creative, by Oceanic writers like Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, J Kehaulani Kauanui, Dan Taulapapa McMullin, Lilikal Kame'eleihiwa, and Witi Ihimaera has been in publication since the early 1990s. From the 1970s John Kneubuhl's plays were exploring and reclaiming the fluid boundaries of gender in Polynesia. Other writers like Konai Thaman, Patricia Grace, Haunani-Kay Trask, and Vilsoni Hereniko have commented extensively about their own strategies for cultural translation and reinscription in their work. In film, writer-directors like Tracey Moffatt, Barry Barclay, and Justine Simei-Barton continue to produce important work that explicitly reinscribes an Oceania enriched with intersubjectivity and nuance. Among other scholars in the social sciences, writers like Vince Diaz and David Gegeo (this issue, 55–88 and 178–183) continue to contribute significant critical work to reconceptualizing Oceania as a complex field of activity. In the early 1990s, the Aboriginal social critic Marcia Langton articulated a research agenda very much like that proposed in "The Oceanic Imaginary." She identified as a central concern, "the need to develop a body of knowledge on representation of Aboriginal people and their concerns in art, film, television and other media and a critical perspective to do with aesthetics and politics, drawing from Aboriginal world views, from Western traditions and from history . . . . The

body of literature which is helpful in approaching this problem comes from a range of disciplines and subject areas" (1993). This list is far from complete, omitting, for example, areas such as contemporary music, dance, and other performance practices. It's not meant to be a comprehensive roll call as much as an attempt to underline the considerable range of significant work already underway in the task of reimagining Oceania.

In addition to questions of inclusion, I find the vision and promise of "The Oceanic Imaginary" to be undermined by language that often tends to blur distinctions, or to generalize or essentialize its arguments. For example, in reference to the dynamics of hegemonic versus vernacular literary languages, Subramani writes that "subalterns can speak through writers as well as for themselves. But the problem remains of reaffirming the voices of marginalized and unrepresented peoples." Here it appears that some distinction is being drawn between the subaltern and those who are marginalized or unrepresented, but neither the basis nor the rationale for such a distinction is provided. Another instance of blurred distinctions occurs in the discussion of globalism and its effects on literature. Here Subramani ups the ante of Wendell Berry's dire prediction for the logical outcome of unlimited economic growth and consumption as a world that is "postagricultural, postreligious, and postnatural." According to Subramani such a world would be "in essence . . . posthuman." While the idea of a "posthuman" world is potentially compelling and provocative, the lack of any amplifying discussion of the term leaves it with something of a hollow ring. While one might entirely agree to the formidable nature of threats posed by global capitalism, what are we to make of the notion that dire circumstances, however wretched, would somehow make us less (or other) than human?

In another instance of generalizing language that threatens to occlude and possibly mislead, the essay continues: "The western utopian vision of corporate leaders and their allies in government is inadequately challenged. In Oceania, problems of globalism are only half-articulated. *So far, there are no counter-narratives*" (emphasis added). In the context of such a claim, where then can we locate narratives of reinscription such as those expressed in sovereignty movements in Hawai'i, Tahiti, Aotearoa, and Vanuatu for example? Or the implications of essays like Hau'ofa's "Our Sea of Islands" that point to the redrawing of economic, cultural, and political boundaries already well underway among Oceanic peoples? Are we meant to infer by their absence in the context of narrative that such processes fail to qualify as counter-narratives to a western corporate

vision? And if so, on what basis? Despite their "inadequacy" and "half" articulation, in Subramani's terms, surely some mention of their relevance as reinscribing narrative would provide a more accurate and culturally relevant representation of the present situation.

In the essay's conclusion I found the summary statements somewhat ambivalent as well. Here a qualitative shift in the role of regional literature in the last several decades is sketched with broad strokes.

> The conditions of writing have altered radically. Globalism presents a different sort of challenge for Oceania. Whereas in the 1970s, *when Pacific literature was born,* intellectuals believed that the writer's task was to unravel and discover myths and metaphors that would reflect *the true essence* of their culture and society, at the close of the twentieth century the world has become too heterogeneous, too complex for that task. One of the *new roles for the imagination* is to interrogate *empty symbols,* transmitted through mass media, that have become reality for some. (pp 160–161; emphasis added)

In the hope of clarifying such claims, I would pose a corresponding series of questions, for example, On what basis do the 1970s constitute the birth date for "Pacific Literature"? Since any claims to reflecting the "true essence" of any culture or society were as problematic in the 1970s as they are now, doesn't this call into question the perception of such a goal as "the writers' task"? Couldn't the problem lie more in the conceptualization of that task as essentializing one's own culture, rather than in extraneous forces like globalism? As for the "new role for the imagination," how is it that the contemporary writer's role to interrogate symbols is a "new" one? What constitutes an empty symbol? Are we meant to imagine that symbols are somehow empty by virtue of their transmission through mass media? In order to be symbols, don't they by definition have to mean something? Isn't the problem at hand more about the presence of all too potent meanings being hidden under seductive surfaces of mass media, for example, that there's only one acceptable definition of beauty or manhood or wealth or success?

By raising such questions of language, my intention is to draw out and turn over some of the rich implications latent in this provocative essay. Despite my reservations about the range and consistency of focus in "The Oceanic Imaginary," I find it an important addition to the ongoing dialogue about the role of writing and literature in the region. Its overarching purpose, Subramani's call for critical "changes in the culture of scholarship" in Oceania goes right to the heart of the matter. As an indigenous writer, I can think of no task more urgent or promising than that of such

cultural translation. The cultural critic Barbara Christian has articulated a similar view from an African-American context:

> [P]eople of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? (1987)

By undertaking the excavation and articulation of Oceanic archives of knowledge, we lay the foundation for articulating indigenous theories of aesthetics, philosophy, arts, culture, and the myriad other ways of knowing that arise from our specific location and historical moment.

By taking up this task, however, we do more than simply offer possibilities for greater understanding of Oceanic worldviews. As indigenous writers and intellectuals, we also discharge the responsibility of passing on our cultural ways of knowing to future generations of our own peoples. "The Oceanic Imaginary" is a call. It awaits response. Call and response. In Kamau Brathwaite's turn of phrase, it's what makes us community.

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